DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 397 405 CS 215 315

AUTHOR Koch, Kevin
TITLE The Writer-Reader Event: Social Cooperation in the Work of Gertrude Buck.
PUB DATE Mar 96
NOTE 10p.; Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the Conference on College Composition and Communication (47th, Milwaukee, WI, March 27-30, 1996).
PUB TYPE Viewpoints (Opinion/Position Papers, Essays, etc.) (120) -- Historical Materials (060) -- Speeches/Conference Papers (150)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS *Audience Awareness; *Educational History; Higher Education; Language Role; Literature Appreciation; *Reader Response; *Rhetorical Theory; *Writing (Composition); Writing Instruction
IDENTIFIERS *Author Reader Relationship; *Buck (Gertrude); Composition Theory

ABSTRACT

At the turn of the century, Gertrude Buck developed a progressive language theory in which writer, reader, and language all participate in the making of meaning. Over the course of her career as a professor, Buck developed a theory of reader empowerment in composition and literature that prefigured some of the main tenets of reader-response theory by half a century. The seeds of Buck's reader-response theory were planted in her dissertation. While this early work still views the reader as controlled by the author, Buck is clearly interested in a psychological explanation of how readers process metaphors. The reader's role continued to expand in Buck's later composition theory. Much of her work on argumentative writing is centered around her belief that the primary goal of an author is to achieve a union of mind with the reader. Further, as a teacher, Buck asked her writing students to think like readers. In an article published in 1900, Buck makes it clear that the cooperation she is looking for between reader and writer should not be coercive. Buck was beginning to see the audience not as a receiver, nor even a processor at the end of the communication process, but as a component of an ongoing process. She similarly viewed literature as a function of time and relationship, an interactive moment rather than a static text. (TB)

****
* Reproductions supplied by EDRS are the best that can be made *
* from the original document. *
****

• Points of view or opinions stated in this document do not necessarily represent official OERI position or policy.

U.S. DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION
Office of Educational Research and Improvement
EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)
This document has been reproduced as received from the person or organization originating it.
Minor changes have been made to improve reproduction quality.

THE WRITER-READER EVENT: SOCIAL COOPERATION IN THE WORK OF GERTRUDE BUCK

By Kevin Koch, Loras College

> Look where you will, motion is the fundamental law of the universe. Evolution is its history from Alpha to Omega,--save that evolution knows neither Alpha nor Omega. Every seemingly stationary existence or object is but a stage in the evolution of the whole. Nothing is finished. Nothing ever will be finished.
>
> - Gertrude Buck[1]

ED 397 405

Several years ago, in 1984, Edward White wrote that it struck him "as no accident" that process-proponents in Composition began professing their beliefs at about the same time that "post-structural literary critics began arguing that reading was a process, a creative (rather than passive) interaction between reader and text" (189). White was articulating a basic underlying connection between Composition and Literary theory.

What White undoubtedly *didn't* mean by "about the same time" was that these two strands of English studies were already coming together at the end of the nineteenth century in the evolving language theory of Gertrude Buck. Gertrude Buck, in 1898 the first Ph.D. student of NCTE co-founder Fred Newton Scott at the University of Michigan and professor of English at Vassar College from 1897 to 1922, developed a progressive language theory in which writer, reader, and language all participate in the making of meaning. Over the course of her career, Buck developed a theory of reader empowerment in Composition and Literature that anticipated

CS215315

PERMISSION TO REPRODUCE AND DISSEMINATE THIS MATERIAL HAS BEEN GRANTED BY
K. Koch
TO THE EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)

BEST COPY AVAILABLE

some of the main tenets of reader-response theory by half a century. Her theories and their applications appeared in articles, books, and textbooks from the mid-1890s through the first two decades of the new century, and then promptly fell into silence until revived again by a small but growing group of Buck enthusiasts.[2]

The seeds of Buck's reader-theory were already planted in her 1898 dissertation, "The Metaphor--A Study in the Psychology of Rhetoric." While this early work still portrays a reader controlled by an author, Buck is clearly interested in a psychological explanation of how readers process metaphors. According to Buck's quaint and now-outdated notion, when an author creates a metaphor about "snowy clouds," for instance, she begins with a single, unified idea which then separates--amoeba-like--into the two components of metaphor, i.e., the literal and the metaphorical images: clouds and their similiarity to fresh mounds of snow. When the reader encounters these two disjunct images, his mind reverberates between them until "the two incompatible images blend into one and the mind is at rest" (51). The reader has in a sense undergone the reverse process of the author. Now, this is only the hint of a "reader-theory," for the author sets the process in motion, and the reader arrives at a pre-determined end. However, Buck's fledgling theory still involves the psychological processes of the reader to a much greater degree than most of her nineteenth-century predecessors, for whom readers were

passive receptors in the communication process, the empty box at the end of the conveyor belt into whom one's message was delivered, whole, intact, and unaltered.

The reader's role continued to expand in Buck's Composition theory. Much of her work on argumentative writing centered around her belief that the primary goal of an author is to achieve a union of mind with the reader. In her 1899 textbook, *A Course in Argumentative Writing*, Buck argues that the successful argument sets up in the reader's mind the "train of thought or reasoning which perviously (sic) led you to this conclusion" (3). As in her dissertation on metaphor the previous year, the audience in Buck's argumentation theory is still manipulated and acted upon by the author. But Buck's reader actively processes the argument, even if the "train of thought" is that which the author has set in motion.

Buck asked her students to think like readers. Rather than provide students with an *a priori* list of argumentation rules, Buck insists that students observe how they as readers and hearers of arguments have responded in the past. Hence her first set of exercises in the book asks students to

> 1) Write a list of all the conclusions which you have tried recently to induce some one else to accept. Did you believe the conclusion yourself? What did you do to make your hearer believe it? Did you succeed in making him accept it? Do you know why you succeeded or why you failed? . . .
> 2) Write a similar list of all the conclusions to which other people have recently tried to lead you. (Recall sermons and public addresses of any kind as well as private conversations.) Did you accept the conclusion in each case? If so, why? If not, why not? Would you have accepted it if the speaker had given you different

> reasons? Or if he had presented his reasons in a different order or form? (*Argumentative Writing* 8)

Buck's still-developing reader-empowerment, though far from complete, was leading her in another direction as well. The unity of mind that author was to achieve with reader would not result merely in the implementation of the author's desires. True union of minds would lead to cooperation, not coercion. In her 1900 article, "The Present Status of Rhetorical Theory," Buck argues that the "anti-social" tradition of the Sophists was reflected in argumentation theories that stress manipulation, where the reader or listener "may the more completely be subjugated to the speaker's will" (168). And while Buck may have misinterpreted the Sophistic tradition, many nineteenth-century textbooks indeed presented argumentation in what Buck called a "purely predatory" (170) fashion.

A prime example of the "predatory" stance in rhetorical theory in the generations prior to Buck's is the work of George Campbell, the eighteenth-century Scottish rhetorician whose *Philosophy of Composition* continued to be used in America throughout the first half of the nineteenth century and heavily influenced most of the American textbooks which followed it. Campbell wrote that successful oratory "bears down every obstacle, and procures the speaker an irresistible power over the thoughts and purposes of his audience" (26). Indeed, for Campbell, rhetorical power is superior even to despotic power, for the latter enslaves only the body while the former enslaves the mind and emotions. As for the

successful rhetorician, "What opposition is he not prepared to conquer. . .?" (26-27).

Buck envisioned instead a rhetorical theory which "advantages both [the audience] and the speaker," a rhetoric in which "speaker and hearer stand on a footing of at least approximate equality" (171).

Buck was beginning to see audience not as a receiver, nor even as processor, at the *end* of a communication process, but as a component in an *ongoing* process. In an interesting depiction of a "dramatic workshop" she offered at Vassar College, Buck pre-figured what collaborative learning and social invention might look like, as well as providing us with a real-life example of an active, participatory audience. In the workshop, Buck's students adapted Selma Lagerlof's story, *A Christmas Guest*, for presentation as a one-act play. Members of the class took part--according to their talents--in writing the play, designing the set, providing music, and, of course, acting. At the same time, the play's audience also became part of the inventive effort. Not mere receptors of the play, the audiences--which included faculty members and classes in critical writing, narrative writing, and freshman English--offered both spontaneous reactions and later written criticisms of the play, "all of genuine service to the writers in their task of revision" ("Vassar Workshop" 181).

The seeds of Buck's growing attention to the psychology and participation of audience, and of her desire for the

reader-writer union to result in social cooperation, finally came to fruition in her literary theory. At least two main themes emerge from Buck's 1916 *The Social Criticism of Literature* which have direct connections to her work in Composition theory: 1) That a book is an *event* or *activity* that occurs when a reader encounters an author "at the point of print" (19); 2) That the goal of criticism--like that of Rhetoric--is social cooperation and progress.

Buck's earlier theory that the writer reproduces her train of thought in the reader's mind, is refined in *Social Criticism*, giving the reader a more active, participating role. Here Buck maintains that the "active-minded" reader must re-create the author's experience in writing the text. The reader must "for a time in very truth, be the writer. He must re-create the writer's *milieu*,"--social, industrial, and political--or else fail to understand the thought that emerged from the writer's mind (21-22). Significantly, Buck has shifted the responsibility from the author to the reader. The reader is no longer a thing to be manipulated, but is an active participant in the literary act. This, of course, requires a cooperative attitude on the part of the reader; indeed, only such an act of participation can be deemed reading, Buck maintains.

Buck further pronounces that one can only define literature in terms of such an event. Buck defines literature and books as functions of time and relationships.

BEST COPY AVAILABLE

In words that foreshadow the reader-response theories of Louise Rosenblatt[3] and Wolfgang Iser[4], Buck writes:

> A book consists, not essentially of so many pages of printed paper bound between covers, but rather of certain activities. . . .A book is, in philosophic terms, the writer's action transforming itself into the reader's reaction at the point of print. And the printed words thus reduce themselves to a mere sign of this transformation, not constituting literature but only making it possible. Literature as a social activity has not yet completely taken place when a book is printed and bound. It fulfills itself, becomes literature in any practical sense of the word, only in the act of reading. (19)

Readers may or may not always be willing or able to interact with all texts at all times. Nevertheless, literature is to be defined in terms of such an interactive moment, not in terms of the text itself. Like Terry Eagleton[5] nearly seventy years later, Buck maintains that a text may thus be "great literature" for one person at one time, but not for someone else at another time. Such a theory, she grants, will "yield us no immutable five-foot shelf of 'the best books'" (42).

A new criticism must emerge, Buck argues, which will ensure "that the writer's part in the production of literature and the reader's part in appreciating it be equally taken into account" (15). Of course, Buck was not yet ready to give up the author's imaginative and moral primacy, nor was she free from the pragmatic view of literature which imbued her era, but even these were conveyed in the language of transaction:

> The poet's intensified consciousness is transmitted to the reader, who receives from it an access of life,

> whether in the form of perception, emotion, or what-not. Wherever this transfer takes place society is at that point leveled up to the poet. The poet's individual gain in perception has been socialized. (39)

The standard of good literature for Buck, then, is that a work must function to bring about social progress and cooperation, whether that be defined politically, economically, aesthetically, or otherwise. For a modern critic, a book "can never again be a barren, finished product, a scholastic abstraction, but a living activity of more than writer and reader, a genuine function of the social body" (31).

If literature is an event involving reader participation rather than an entity bound between book covers, it is never completed, but always ongoing. For Buck, literature "is not alone a creature but also a creator of the society it serves" (*Social Criticism* 60).

In an undergraduate paper titled "The Religious Experience of a Skeptic," Gertrude Buck provided a metaphor for the reader-writer event. If "motion is the fundamental law of the universe," (27) as Buck proclaims, then literature is an event that occurs again and again as authors and readers converge in and through a world of discourse, a world where particular meaning is but a snapshot of process in motion.

-- 1996 Conference on College Composition & Communication, Milwauke, Wisconsin.

NOTES

[1] From Gertrude Buck's "The Religious Experience of a Skeptic." See WORKS CITED.

[2] Among the recent scholarship on Gertrude Buck, I am particularly indebted to the work by Rebecca J. Burke, Gerald Mulderig, James Berlin, Virginia Allen, JoAnne Campbell, and Vickie Ricks Weir. Of course, special note must be made of Albert Kitzhaber's 1953 dissertation, "Rhetoric in American Colleges, 1859-1900" for its resurrecting of Buck's work. See accompanying bibliography for detailed information of these authors' work.

[3] See Louise Rosenblatt: *Literature as Exploration* (1938) and *The Reader, The Text, The Poem* (1978).

[4] See Wolfgang Iser: "The Reading Process: A Phenomenological Approach." In *Reader-Response Criticism*, ed. Jane P. Tompkins. Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1980.

[5] See Terry Eagleton: *Literary Theory: An Introduction* (1983).

WORKS CITED

Buck, Gertrude. "*A Course in Argumentative Writing.*" New York: Henry Holt, 1899.

---. "*The Metaphor--A Study in Psychology of Rhetoric.*" Diss. U of Michigan, 1898. Published in "Contributions to Rhetorical Theory," No.5, Ed. Fred Newton Scott. Ann Arbor: Inland Press, 1899.

---. "The Present Status of Rhetorical Theory." *Modern Language Notes* 15 (1900): 167-174.

---. "The Religious Experience of a Skeptic." Special Gertrude Buck issue of *Vassar Miscellany Monthly*. (Feb. 1923): 21-28.

---. *The Social Criticism of Literature*. New Haven: Yale University Press, 1916.

---. "The Vassar Workshop." *Vassar Quarterly*. (May 1917): 181-183.

Campbell, George. *The Philosophy of Rhetoric*. New York: Harper & Brothers, 1845 ed.

White, Edward M. "Post-Structural Literary Criticism and the Response to Student Writing." *CCC* 35 (1984): 186-195.

BEST COPY AVAILABLE